CARNIVAL

REANNA FIELD

A car explodes while leaving Lakeside Amusement Park. Rebecca is assumed dead. After James and Chaz argue about it, they and their friends go there to look for her. The tulpas instead find themselves in Carnival, the park's Faerie counterpart, a backdrop which makes finding Rebecca only one of their worries.

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REANNA FIELD

Barnes & Noble Press

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The Moral Guardians gave *Carnival* an R rating for language, some violence, drama, spirit possession, polyandry, horror, and someone getting hit by a tree.

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Reanna Field

To Lakeside Amusement Park, the only White City still running.

PREFACE

Reanna: In February 2016, I dreamed Linkin Park wrote a song called "Carnival." It was inspired by something that happened to the members. I couldn't finish the dream because my cat Luna woke me up. So, I wrote *Carnival* as a fanfiction to fill in the blanks.

In 2019, I decided to turn it into a more original story. That's why Chaz, Brian, Rebecca, James, and José were created. (Jackalope was for something else, and Caleb started as an in-headspace construct.)

And then, my characters became tulpas. We're a parogenic system. (A *system* is a group of people who share a brain. A *parogenic* system is voluntarily created, whether or not it was intentional.) I didn't want to write stories about my tulpas at first. I was afraid we'd be called fake for doing so. I still struggle with it.

In 2021, Chaz wanted to work on *Carnival.* He and some others agreed to be in it. For them, it's like acting in a movie. Then, online classes happened, and *Carnival* fell into development hell.

Fast forward to the summer of 2022. Caleb kept asking me when we were going to continue our story. Eventually, we continued working and completed it.

Carnival is the first major project we worked on as a system. Our purpose of this book is to entertain and nothing more.

Main Cast

The main cast has eight tulpas who agreed to be in Carnival: Chaz, Brian, Caleb, and Jackalope, Rebecca, Rita, José, and James (called "Phoenix" in the dialogue.) I'm describing them in this section titled: "Main Cast." Return here when you and yours need a reminder.

Chaz has short brown hair, brown eyes, and pale skin. He usually wears an olive-green t-shirt under a beige button-up shirt (worn unbuttoned), a pair of dark brown jeans, a pair of white ankle socks, and a pair of dark brown sneakers which look like Vans shoes. Chaz also wears a pair of small Sterling silver stud earrings.

Brian has short dark auburn hair in tight curls, a short beard, dark brown eyes, and light skin. He usually wears a blue long-sleeved t-shirt, a pair of black jeans, a pair of white socks, and a pair of black slip-ons which look like Vans shoes.

Caleb has short black hair in tight curls, brown eyes, and dark brown skin. He usually wears a light grey t-shirt, a pair of blue jeans, a pair of white socks, and a pair of white sneakers which look like Adidas Superstar shoes.

Jackalope is an anthropomorphic Black-Tailed Jackrabbit with agouti fur, dark brown eyes, and black fur on the tips of her large ears. She has pronghorn-like horns on her forehead and usually wears a loose-fitting black dress with a short skirt (to keep from tripping on it while running.)

Rebecca has long auburn hair in loose curls, dark brown eyes, light skin. She usually wears a bright red swing dress, a pair of black tights, and a pair of bright red classic Mary Jane shoes.

Rita has long wavy burgundy hair (tied back), black eyes, and pale skin. She usually wears a salmon pink button-up shirt, a pair of beige jeans, a pair of white ankle socks, and a pair of light pink slip-ons which look like Vans shoes. She is also Chaz's twin sister.

José has short black hair, dark brown eyes, and olive-brown skin. He usually wears a pair of black wire frame glasses, a Sterling silver Cross necklace over a purple t-shirt, a pair of blue jeans, a pair of white socks, and a pair of black sneakers which look like Nike Air Force One shoes.

James has very short Titian red hair, a short beard, brown eyes, and light skin. He usually wears a light grey sweatshirt, a pair of blue jeans, a pair of white socks, and a pair of white sneakers which look like Adidas shoes.

Note: In-headspace disorders are present because the headspace is where we spend most of our time. Needless to say, they don't affect us while using the body.

1: ENTERING CARNIVAL

Denver, Colorado. The sky was overcast. At Lakeside's parking lot was a woman with auburn hair wearing a bright red dress and a pair of bright red dress shoes. The police assumed her to be Rebecca. She went into her cherry red car. She began driving out of the parking lot, and her car burst into flames.

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Lakewood, Colorado. In an apartment unit, a dim lamp lit the upper right corner of the front room. Brain, Caleb, Jackalope, José, and James sat on a grey couch right of that lamp. On the carpet floor lay Chaz, too sad to notice his friends. They glanced at him, then at each other, unsure how to comfort him.

"Why?" Chaz whispered to himself, "why, why, why, why, why?" A moment later, he said, "no use crying now." He sat up, wiped the tears off his face, stood, and noticed his friends. They stared at him.

"Why are you staring, and how long have you—"

James stood, "you killed her, didn't you?"

Chaz blinked, "what?"

"You heard me." He smirked.

"Phoenix is dead," José whispered. He stood, but Brian pulled at his t-shirt. So, he sat back down.

"What makes you think I killed her!?" Chaz said.

James shrugged, "I don't know. Maybe because you don't trust anyone—"

"I trusted Rebecca- "Chaz pointed at him- "and *you* know it!"

"Yeah, right. So, you decided to—"

"No, I *didn't.*" He clenched his fists. "They said there was a leak in her car's gas tank! I was here when it happened, and I didn't know until Brian told me!"

"You probably poked a hole in it," James said.

"I didn't touch Rebecca's car when she left!"

He pointed at Chaz, "you *did* something to her car to make it explode—"

"No, I didn't! Why the fuck are you accusing me in the first place!?"

"You—"

"I DID NOT! WHY WOULD I WANT TO KILL HER!? I LOVED HER!"

The room fell silent.

Chaz felt shaky, so he lay on the floor again. He cried again. James sat on the couch and lowered his eyes.

"Happy now?" Jackalope whispered to him.

Brian stood and walked towards Chaz.

"Don't touch me."

He found a box of tissues and placed it next to his friend instead, respecting his vulnerability.

Ten awkward minutes later, Chaz took a deep breath, sat up, used a tissue, stood, and turned to face Brian.

He said, “you said the police won’t investigate because as far as anyone knows, the explosion was caused by a gas leak from a bad fuel tank.”

Brian nodded (as if it weren’t said earlier.)

“But they didn’t see any body!”

Jackalope kicked José's leg.

“Let’s go to Lakeside and find Rebecca ourselves.”

/ / /

Chaz, Jackalope, Brian, Caleb, José, and James entered Lakeside Amusement Park the next day.

In front of them *should have been* a carousel in plain sight. Left of it was a picnic area with what *should have been* red park benches. To its right *should have been* a food court and a bridge which *should have led* to KiddieLand. Back on the left *should have been* the sign for Cyclone. In front of it *should have been* the skeleton of Staride hiding behind some blue spruce trees. Staride *SHOULD HAVE BEEN* looking over a chained-off boating dock with a fence around it.

The picnic area had white benches. Almost everything was painted white. Staride was there, but the carousel went missing (and so did Cyclone!) The group saw no chain or fence keeping people from climbing on the decaying boating dock, and it showed no decay. Skoota Boats doesn’t belong there! What happened to its boats? Where did that large water slide come from, and why is its edge in Skoota Boat’s pool!? What happened to Kiddie Land? At least the bridge to that missing area and the Tower of Jewels seemed normal. It was drizzling.

“Okay- “Chaz clapped his hands- “let’s all stick together—”

Caleb shoved him aside, "I'll do it! Let's all stick together, so we don't get lost, and if anyone sees something *completely* weird, scream."

Chaz crossed his arms, "what are you? A mind-reader?"

"I don't know; what do you think?"

José raised his hand, "I think it was predictable, what he just said!"

"Predictable," repeated James.

"Knew he was gonna say that." Brain raised his hand.

Jackalope nodded.

"Caleb is a mind-reader! He is reading our minds *right now!*"

Everyone else stared at Chaz.

"What!?" He pointed at Caleb. "He said what I was gonna say, and you guys were... um, so I—forget it." He threw his hands in the air and started walking away. "Admit it! It was funny!"

"Okay!" Brian called back.

When out of earshot, James said, "that wasn't funny, was it?"

Brian and Jackalope shook their heads.

2: DANGER

A scream pierced the amusement park.

Chaz was on the ground. His hands and feet touched it, his knees slightly bent.

A feral house cat the size of a Bandersnatch. It had amber eyes and bright orange fur. It swatted at Chaz, making him scramble to his feet. He covered his head as it crouched.

What the hell are you doing with your hands over your head? RUN! Chaz started running.

The cat didn't pounce on him, but it did scratch his right arm which made him fall again. Chaz managed to shield his face. He closed his eyes. The cat crouched and prepared to "play" with its prey.

I'm gonna die, thought the prey, *it's gonna kill me!*

"Are you okay?"

"Huh?" Chaz muttered, opening his eyes. Slowly, he lowered his arms, sat up, and realized he made a scene in front of a bunch of people. His face burned.

What...just...happened?

Chaz waved his arm, "stop staring—ow! Is it strange to see someone attacked by a huge cat!?"

"What huge cat?"

Am I that tired, or is it finally happening? The crowd didn't matter to him anymore. He looked at his arm, *but if the cat weren't real, I wouldn't be hurt.*

He felt a tap on his shoulder and jumped.

"Do you—"

"DON'T TOUCH ME!" Chaz used his right arm to push away the person's left one. "Ow!" His face still burned.

/ / /

Meanwhile, everyone else was looking for him. They started when they heard that horrid scream.

"Chaz is nowhere," Brian said, "he couldn't've vanished."

James and Jackalope sat on a bench.

"Well," whatever he saw took him away," James said.

"You think he's dead!"

He stood, "I didn't say that! You're beginning to sound like Chaz."

"Yes you did," Jackalope thought aloud, crossing her arms. She didn't want an argument, but she was just as frustrated as her friends (plus James.)

"Maybe he did vanish." Brian sat on the bench but stood again because it was wet with rainwater.

José crossed his arms, "two seconds ago, you said he didn't." *I can't believe one of us went missing the second we stepped into this junkyard!*

They argued until James waved his arms.

"Wait, wait, wait. Can we stop fighting for a sec?"

They stopped arguing.

"There were six of us when we got here, right?"

"Yeah."

What is this? A math problem? Brian thought.

"Chaz is gone, so there should be five of us."

Brian his forehead, "no shit!"

"So, why are there four of us?"

"One, two, three- "José quickly looked in a circle-"where's Caleb?"

"Now *him!?*"

"*Guys!*"

Brian, Jackalope, José, and James looked in circles.

"Right behind you," Caleb said between pants.

They turned to face him.

He pointed to the direction Chaz left, "girl...girl. Both of us...not alone! Big cat...by the neck—*cramp,* cramp, cramp."

"Now what?"

Brain elbowed Jackalope.

Chaz seemed to stumble through an invisible portal. Caleb gestured to him, "he's pretending to be roadkill."

Everyone else giggled.

"Shut up!"

"All right. *Heesh.*"

Chaz started picking himself up- "ow-" but succeeded in sitting on his knees.

"How long until he sees his arm bleeding?" José whispered.

"What?" Brian whispered back.

He facepalmed then helped Chaz stand.

"Thank you for not *gawking at my arm.*"

"You're welcome. Why does it look like a demon cut it?"

I'm lucky it didn't kill me. "Some demon cat. At least it stopped bleeding."

"I don't think a cut like *that-* "James pointed at Chaz's arm-"would've stopped bleeding."

"Yes, it did. See? No bleeding. I'll even rub it." Chaz rubbed one of the cuts with two of his fingers. It bled.

"So, it didn't stop," he muttered.

Jackalope started looking inside ticket booths and under park benches.

"What you looking for?" Caleb asked.

"A first aid kit or something similar. You know, so Chaz *doesn't* die."

"Oh, no!" José said as he put his hands on his head, "he needs a tourniquet!"

Jackalope rolled her eyes then continued searching.

She gasped. "I think I found some bandages!" Then, she hit her head against the "ceiling" of a ticket booth she was looking in. "Ow." Jackalope placed a roll of bandages on its countertop. Brian grabbed it.

"I don't see anything we can clean the cuts with, but I found some scissors."

"Does anyone know a way out of here?"

3: SIX PLUS ONE

A woman with deep burgundy hair tied back, black eyes, and pale skin. She wore a salmon pink button-up shirt, a pair of beige jeans, and a pair of light pink slip-on shoes.

"It's just Rita," James said.

"Why are you here?" Chaz asked.

Rita replied, "I sent you a text, but you didn't respond!"

He realized he forgot his phone.

"I waited, like, an hour before trying again. I texted you a few times. *Then,* I tried calling, but you didn't pick up, so I tried calling Brian. But HE didn't pick up, either!"

"*Then,* I thought, 'where would Chaz be' and came up with 'where Rebecca was last,' so I came to Lakeside. *Then,* this huge cat takes me, and now, I'm here."

Caleb walked up to Rita, "so the cat *wasn't* trying to kill you?"

"But it tried to kill Chaz," José said.

"Yeah, why Chaz?"

"The cat hates him." She stifled a laugh.

Chaz was not amused.

"Anyway," Brian said, "we don't know how to get out."

"Great, now, we're stuck here!"

Jackalope pointed at Chaz, "it's his fault."

"Yes, it's—when was it my fault!?" He turned to face her. "*When* was it *my* fault!?"

"It was your idea to come here. Now, we're all going to die."

"You agreed to it!"

"When?"

"When José said, 'I'll go because you're my friend.'"

"And we agreed?"

Chaz pointed at Jackalope, "you're the one who said, 'same here!'"

"No, that was the Phoenix!"

Brian sat on a bench, "this is gonna be awhile." *Why the hell are you fighting over this right now?*

José growled quietly then yelled, "I'm wet; we're all cold! Let's forget it and find a place before we catch pneumonia."

"Oh, and you're one to talk," Chaz said, "remember when you..."

Great. José joined the argument. Then James, then Caleb, then Brian.

Seriously, Rita thought, *here! When there's a huge cat on the loose! I don't even know what they're fighting about.*

Someone said something that upset her, and now, she joined the argument. It lasted for a few minutes.

"Stop it, stop it, STOP IT!" Chaz shouted as he stomped his foot, "stop fighting for two fucking seconds!"

Rita, Brian, José, Caleb, Jackalope, and James stopped yelling over each other.

"Okay, what are we fighting about?"

"Phoenix said—"

"I did not!"

"STOP! Does anyone remember why?"

"Um, not really."

"Me neither."

Jackalope shook her head.

"Why am I in it?" Rita asked, "and why are you guys here?"

James pointed at Chaz, "he—"

"I can answer for myself!" he said through gritted teeth. Taking a deep breath, he sat on a park bench.

Chaz took another deep breath, "Brian told me he learned that Rebecca's car exploded when she started driving out of Lakeside. The explosion was caused by a gas leak from the fuel tank.

"Firebird here- "Chaz pointed at James-"kept calling me a murderer until I finally got the point across. So now, we're looking for her."

"You're looking for a dead woman?"

"Rebecca's not dead!"

Everyone gave Chaz blank stares.

"José said they didn't see a body in the car; there-there must be a chance, right?"

"*Sure.*" Rita pretended to fix her shirt. *She's definitely dead.*

Brain raised his hand, "I'm with Rita."

"Wha...who else thinks she's dead?" Chaz scanned the group.

"Uh..." José looked at the man next to him. "Caleb?"

"No way! You started talking."

"Am I the only one here who thinks Rebecca could be alive?"

James smirked, "well, it *was* an explosion you—"

"For the last *fucking* time, I DIDN'T KILL HER!"

"Who cares!" Rita held up her hands as if to stop a choir from singing. "Let's go somewhere dry."

/ / /

Chaz, Brian, Jackalope, Caleb, José, Rita, and James found the carousel under a dark green pavilion. It lacked its white pavilion-ish building with the neon sign that reads: MERRY-GO-ROUND.

José thought the carousel looked creepy without its white building. Caleb noticed a lack of figures. Rita noted the faint presences after doing a quick reality check. James was tired. Brian hoped he was too tired to lose sleep over obsessions of bugs or spiders crawling on him.

About the carousel: It had three wooden platforms and four rows of hand-painted wooden figures. The top platform had a mock organ piano and the carousel's motor. The middle platform had two rows of figures. Each one had four jumping horses separated by four standing horses and two jumping greyhounds. The bottom platform had a top row similar to the middle's. Its bottom row had four jumping horses separated by four chariots pulled by the last eight standing horses, two to a chariot.

"Looks like someone's sleeping alone," Rita muttered. She clapped, "one of us is sleeping alone in these creepy-ass carriages, and it ain't gonna be—"

Everyone else had shuffled into pairs: Chaz with Brian, James with Jackalope, and José with Caleb.

"Aw, man!" *At least they're dying together.*

Chaz is Rita's brother. Brian and Jackalope are asexual. José, Caleb, and James are straight but know she is a lesbian. So, Rita came to one conclusion.

"What? Are you guys six?" She crossed her arms.

"No," Chaz said.

"I'll sleep with you." Jackalope walked to her side. "I'm not fond of the Phoenix, anyway."

"Jackalope's not six."

"I'm not six," Chaz said.

"Are too."

"Am not!"

"Are too!"

"Am not—ah!" He rubbed his arm. "I forgot about that." *At least it stopped bleeding. I think.*

"Don't you have something for it?"

"The bandages!" Jackalope took the roll from Brian's hand and started wrapping it around Chaz's cuts.

Speaking of Brian, he decided to sleep on the bottom platform instead. Rita kneeled and whispered, "hey, Brian. That's not your carriage."

He muttered something, waving his hand.

"Okay then, we'll drag you."

"Drag me," he replied.

"I can't. My arm is hurt." Chaz smiled. He sat next to Brian and kissed his head, "we'll take the closest one."

/ / /

Chaz, Brian, Rita, Jackalope, Caleb, José, and James were divided into four chariots by sunset.

José said a short prayer. He feared one of them won't—or none of them will—wake up tomorrow.

4: SEVEN MINUS ONE

Brian was awakened by Chaz's absence. He yawned, *Chaz must be doing something.* He sat up for a few minutes. When he lay back on the chariot seat, he saw something move!

It was one of the standing horses (correction: the only standing unicorn.) The mare was the size of a Knabstrup horse. She had a white coat with a black Dalmatian pattern, a black mane, and a black tail. She had a gilded horn on her forehead. Her eyes? She *had no* eyes.

Wait, Brian thought, *the unicorn's alive?*

Slowly, he stood and left the chariot, "hi, unicorn."

The unicorn dug her front right hoof into a wooden dent, bobbed her head, and snorted.

"Woah!" Brian took a step back.

She started whinnying.

"Fuck! No, no, no! Quiet!" he whispered, cautiously walking towards her.

She started neighing.

He stopped, "shh! Everyone else is sleeping. Do you want to—"

It hit him: only he and the unicorn were at the carousel. At night. Under a full moon peeking behind the clouds.

I'm alone.

Brian's realization calmed her. She shook off her reins and removed the bit from her mouth.

"My name's Brian, um, Denton. Um...you're a unicorn! Why am I talking to something that doesn't know—"

"Not 'something,' fool, some*one!*"

He jumped.

"And yes, I understand you. My name is Demise. I trap souls in Carnival." Demise bowed her head, so her horn pointed at him.

"What's that—"

A chatter, house cat for "target locked."

Brian gasped. He turned and saw the huge cat, its fur now a bright orange. It had a paw on its fresh prey: Chaz.

"You...you killed him!?"

It was a surplus kill: James (dead.) José (dead.) Caleb (dead.) Rita (dead.) Jackalope (dead.)

"YOU KILLED ALL OF THEM!?"

"Time for you to join them!" Demise sang, "Scythe?"

"**DEMISE?**"

Brian tried backing away, but he bumped into the unicorn's shoulders.

"**HOW SHALL HANDLE THIS PREY'S UNDOING?**"

He ran from them.

"Like hunting a mouse."

"**A FINE SUGGESTION.**"

Do you know how a cat hunts her prey? First, she watches and waits. Next, she stalks her prey as *silently* as she can. When the time is right, she POUNCES on it and "plays" with it until it is too weak to fight back (assuming she didn't kill the prey instantly.)

Scythe would have bitten down on Brian's neck had he not woken.

It was a dream. He tried to sit up, but he couldn't move! Before Brian could say, "this isn't funny," he remembered Chaz was sleeping on the floor under the chariot seat.

"No, no, no, no, no!" he whispered.

"Shh, quiet. You'll wake everyone up."

A shadow of a girl. Based on the outline, she had long curly hair and was wearing a nightgown.

Thank goodness! Are there bugs on me?

"Will you play with me?" the girl asked.

The bugs? "It's, like, four in the morning. Why would...why are you talking to me?" *Are there bugs on me? (Shut up.)*

"First of all, it's- "she looked to the Tower of Jewels as though it had a clock-"not four o' clock. *Second of all,* I want you to play with me."

"What if I'm a bad guy?" Brian asked, "do you want to play with a bad guy?" *It feels like there's bugs crawling on my back.*

"You're not a bad guy."

"How do you know?" *A bad guy would've killed everyone by now. Okay, but are there bugs on me? (Shut up!)*

"The bad guy would've asked *me* to play," the girl replied.

I need to go, anyway. "Fine. First, I need to go to the bathroom and maybe eat something." *And check for bugs!*

"Okay! I can find some food and water and bathrooms. Then, I can show you the funhouse. And then—"

"Get off me!" *I NEED TO CHECK FOR BUGS!*

"Kay. And then—" the girl cocked her head to one side. "Why are you checking your shirt?"

"Are there bugs on me?" Brian asked.

"I don't think so." She started walking. He followed her.

"Are you sure?"

"Yep. And then—"

"*Really* sure?"

"Yep. And—"

"Really *really* sure?"

"Yep. AND THEN..."

It took much of Brian's energy not to ask again.

/ / /

Caleb and Rita had awakened.

"So, you still hear things with your pills?" Caleb whispered.

"Yeah, but before my pills, my voices bothered me a lot. They ain't scary for me; they're distracting, and I'd yell at them all the time. So, the pills take away a lot of it. Even the appetite increase shouts over my negative symptoms that are like, 'but I'm too tired to eat.'"

"What are negative—"

But the rest were awakened by the sound of an old, useless, and unloaded pistol hitting against a gilded pole holding up one of the jumping greyhounds. They would have been more upset if Chaz didn't yell, "where the hell is Brian!?"

"I don't know," José whined, lying back down, "probably doing his business or something."

Chaz pulled him up, "no one's sleeping in until we find him!"

"It's daytime, so he can't be in too much danger," Rita said as he looked for something to brush her hair with.

"Danger?" he squeaked. His eyes widened, "does ANYONE care?"

Jackalope raised her paw after peeking out of her hiding place.

"Anyone else?"

Caleb yawned and scratched his head.

"Face it, Chaz," James said, "we're all too tired to care."

"This is the *last* fucking place Brian should be lost in, Phoenix, and you know it!"

José put on his glasses, "with yesterday as proof, Chaz wins. Let's clean up first. Actually, let's find some food. I'm hungry."

"'Clean up?'"

"At least we'll smell clean when we find him. Also, don't you need to clean that cut?"

Chaz rolled his eyes.

"Speaking of food," Rita said, "I just found some with some water in my—I *did* bring my pills!" *Wait, no I didn't. Who brought them? Fairies? I hope the food isn't going bad.*

Jackalope just ate some grasses and a few pine needles on some bushes. There weren't many plants in Carnival.

/ / /

Brian and the shadow girl, named Adriana, returned to the carousel only to find it empty.

"Maybe they left to find Rebecca's body," Brian muttered. He tried not to check his shirt again.

Adriana pulled at his arm, "I wanna go to the funhouse! The horses scare me."

They should be back when they're done. "Okay."

"I'll show you!" she walked briskly. Brain followed.

"By the way, are there employees that take care of the food and bathrooms?"

"No. Just fairies."

"Fairies?" He smiled.

"Yep. That's why we left some food. My mommy said that if you don't, they'll be mean and not help you anymore."

"Well, my partner said that fairies don't like humans, and I should be grateful when they help because of it."
Adriana nodded her head in agreement.

/ / /

Something led the search party to a building with good bathrooms and showers, a place Lakeside *definitely* didn't have.

Rita felt faint presences while she showered. When she finished, she saw a clean towel under a clean pair of underwear (hopefully in her size) and a brush. Same for the guys. (All had to wear the clothes they came in, though.)

The sky was overcast, the weather chilly. (Because this is Colorado we're talking about, it probably wasn't going to rain.)

"We're clean now" Chaz said, "happy?" He and Rita left some of their food for the fairies.

"Now, we can find Brian." José started walking. *Hopefully, we find him alive.* He made the sign of the Cross, "amen."

5: MURDER

Brian remembered being held back by something while hearing screams and banging noises. He must have blacked out. He didn't come to in the funhouse; he found himself in a pitch black space of emptiness. Adriana lay next to him, now a pale grey.

Where am—Brian saw something red all over his left arm. *Is this blood?* He sat up, *maybe the kid will tell me. Are there—(one more time, I dare you!)*

Brian discovered the source of blood: Adriana.

No. He shook his head. *It can't. It can't. It can't. Not hers. It can't. It can't.* He stroked her hair, and he whispered, "I'm sorry."

"HELLO!" a Laffing Sal said.

Who said that!?

"HELLO," she repeated.

Brian didn't respond.

"WELCOME...TO WHERE MY FUNHOUSE STOOD."

What he wanted to say vanished when two hinged flat mirrors appeared in front of him. Brain saw himself: dark auburn hair in thick curls, dark brown eyes, and light skin. He still wore the clothes he had on when entering Lakeside. Except the left side of his shirt was soaked in shadow girl's blood. Because of the hinged mirrors' angle, Brian couldn't see the Laffing Sal behind him, her costume also stained with blood.

Bits of the memory returned: Adriana became trapped in a glass box. Scrawny Dark Hands grabbed Brian by the waist, covered his mouth, and forced him to watch something. There was banging, screaming, and laughing. Brian shook his head.

"I KILLED THE KID, AND THE DARK HANDS STOPPED YOU FROM SAVING HER."

He closed his eyes and hoped it was another nightmare.

"DID YOU LOOK AT THE MIRRORS?"

He nodded.

"TIME FOR MY FUNHOUSE TO OPEN!" The Laffing Sal cackled as if told a hilarious joke.

"Stop it! Stop laughing, *please!* Stop laughing, stop laughing, STOP!"

"Hey, wake up. I think," a *person* said. He was thin, had brown eyes, and had brown skin. He wore a red bowling shirt, a pair of blue jeans, and a pair of black sneakers which looked like Vans shoes.

What? Brian opened his eyes. He had no idea why or how he ended up lying on asphalt.

"You looked like you were having a bad...something."

He stood, shaking, "I-I woke up in this...funhouse thing. And-and I saw a dead girl, and there was blood on my shirt, and-and I heard this scary voice, and I heard it, and...and I heard it, and it said—"

"My mom said the funhouse closed before I was born. We're next to the Dragon, now. Also, I saw you on the ground, and you were like, 'stop laughing! Stop laughing!'"

Brain began to cry.

The person hugged him, "you'll be okay. I don't know what you're going through, but you'll be okay."

"No, I won't."

/ / /

Rita sat beside Chaz in a chariot, “maybe Brian found himself in our world like you said happened to you yesterday.”
He blinked, “what.” His voice sounded soft and quiet.

“He could be in our world, like what happened to you.”

“Where.”

“Where we live. Brian could be there,” Rita replied.

“Who.”

“Brian.”

“Oh. I hope so.”

“Did you hear anything before he left?” José asked.
Chaz blinked, “what.”

“Did you hear anything?”

“Huh?”

“This is useless.” James sat on the second platform. “He keeps zoning out. Brian’s probably dead by now.”

“How about you shut the fuck up?” Caleb snapped.

“What,” Chaz asked.

“José asked if you heard anything before Brian left,” Jackalope said.

“Oh. I heard whispering, but I ignored it because I thought it was my paranoia.”

“I thought it was one of my voices,” Rita said.

“Hey- “Caleb jumped off a standing horse he was sitting on-”what if Phoenix and I looked for Brian tomorrow?”
Chaz blinked, “do what.”

“Search for Brian, Phoenix and me.”

“Okay.” He nodded. “I hope he’s okay."

6: MEANWHILE

Brian woke up on a brown couch. In front of it was a coffee table. He saw a large window next to a blue back door. About one yard away from that door was a flight of stairs.

This isn't my apartment! Where am I!? He tried to sit up, but he couldn't move. And there was no shadow girl sitting on him.

"Chaz!" Brian cried as he struggled to move, "Chaz help! I can't move! I can't move! I can't move! HELP!" Then, his body relaxed, and his ability to move returned. Brian sat up, shaking. His face burned. Every time.

Footsteps. The man he saw at the Dragon walked down the stairs, "sorry I didn't come down earlier. I was in the bathroom."

"You're fine," Brian said, "what's your name?"

"Adam."

"Um, Adam, how did I get here?"

"I don't know where you live, so I brought you to my place." Adam revealed a grocery bag from under the coffee table. "Also, I saw some red stuff on your shirt, so I went to Wal-Mart and got you a new one. I hope it fits."

"Thanks." *How do I not remember this?*

He sat on the couch beside Brian, "oh yeah! I did some research while you took a nap, and I learned—what you told me—maybe you were hallucinating during a seizure."

"I don't hallucinate during seizures," Brian said.

"Wait, you have seizures? Anyway, how do you know you don't?"

"I've had eight or ten of them in the past three years. They usually happen while I'm lying down. For me, it's like sleep paralysis. But I'm awake, *not* hallucinating, and freaking out while saying 'I can't move.'"

"That explains the shouting. So, what brought you to Lakeside?"

Brian replied, "my partner Chaz, his girlfriend died in a car explosion from a gas leak while driving from there.

"Then, Phoenix—"

Adam's eyes brightened, "Phoenix from Linkin Park!?"

"I wish. He'd be much nicer. Anyway, Phoenix decides he's gonna piss off Chaz by accusing-"with air quotes-"him of murder. After the argument, we and a few other friends decided to go to Lakeside to find her, and we somehow ended up in a different dimension."

He nodded slowly, unsure how to understand this information.

"Um," Brian said, "will you drive me back there? I need to find my friends."

Adam hesitated. Then, he said, "I'll drive you tomorrow."

7: THE PSYCHIC

The next day, Caleb and James looked for Brian.

Caleb entered a purple tent and saw a glass ball resting on a small brown coffee table. He used his hand to dust it off, wondering what it would do.

THIS SHOULD BE A FUN WAY TO DIE, the glass ball read, IS IT NOT?

What the hell does that mean!?

DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING AT?

"Yes, I do. Phoenix, this ain't funny!"

"What ain't funny?" James entered the tent. "Ooh! A crystal ball!"

CLEARLY, YOU DON'T.

"Clearly, you don't," he repeated.

"You take a guess, smart-ass!" Caleb said.

"I just did. A crystal ball."

LOOK, BLOCKHEADS.

He picked up the glass ball, and they looked at it.

WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING AT IS A MAGIC ENERGY CORE. IT CAN HURT YOU A LOT, SO BE CAREFUL.

"Like *how?*" James crossed his arms.

"WE'LL SHOW YOU!"

Juvenile Dark Hands whirled around Caleb, trying to take the glass ball. James laughed at him.

"Get! GET! Go away! Leave me alone!" He fell.

The juvenile Dark Hands flew to the other side of the tent. They laughed upon seeing the look on his face when he realized the glass ball had vanished.

"If that were *NORMAL* magic energy, you'd be *fine,* but it stores *POISON* magic energy."

James caught his breath, "did they just say—" he blinked. "That's not good."

"That makes no fucking sense. *Poison!?*"

"HAVE A NICE AFTERLIFE!" The poltergeists fled.

"Caleb and James I assume?"

James definitely stopped laughing.

A slender woman with dark hair and olive brown skin. She wore a magenta sundress. Her green eyes seemed to glow in the dark like a cat's eyes.

"The Carnival you're in?" she asked.

"I guess so?" Caleb stood. "What's your name?"

"'You're in?" James asked.

"Olivia I am."

"*'You're in?'*"

"Yes, James—"

"Don't call me James."

"Be nice!" Caleb snapped.

"Yes, *Phoenix.*" Olivia rolled her eyes. "In the Carnival you are."

"And stop speaking Yoda!"

He groaned and put his hands on his face.

"Speaking Yoda I am not." *Who's Yoda?*

"It's annoying!"

"Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yeah."

"Then, annoying I am not."

"And *annoying* you still are."

Caleb thought his head was going to explode.

/ / /

Back at the carousel, Chaz saw a familiar figure walking towards it. He stood.

"Brian!" He ran to him and hugged him. He kissed him, "you're alive."

"Don't cry," Brian said.

"But I thought you died."

"Let's go sit down."

Chaz sniffed then nodded. He let go of Brian, and they walked back to the carousel.

"Where the hell were you?"

Brian hesitated then said, "I don't want to talk about it."

"Fine!" Chaz said, "don't tell me. It's not like I care." He quickened his pace.

He's just worried, he's just worried, he's just worried, he's just worried...

/ / /

Ten minutes later:

Olivia took a deep breath, "let me tell you a few things."

"Fucking finally!"

"Sit down."

The men did.

"Wouldn't it be easier to see the table?" Caleb asked.

"Not really." She sat on the ground.

"Okay, Olivia," James said, "what's my fortune?"

"Grim if you keep being a jackass to Chaz."

He lowered his eyes and pretended to dust off his jeans.

"I want to talk about what happened to you and your friends."

Caleb sighed in relief, "where do I start—"

"Do you know what Carnival is?" Olivia asked.

"I know! I know! It's that game thing Chaz always talks about." James smiled.

Caleb growled and put his hands on his burning face, "if this were a game, you'd be dead *and* the only one in it!"

"An in-between realm, not parallel or a part of ours. When it comes to these places, you can be in one, the other, both, or switch randomly. It can be confusing.

"Now, I ask: why are you in Carnival?"

"We're looking for a woman named Rebecca and a man named Brian," he replied, "have you seen 'em?"

"No, I haven't. May I tell you what could happen in the future?"

James raised an eyebrow, "don't you mean 'will?"

"I know what will happen if present events keep their course."

"I'm fine," Caleb muttered, "this is creepy enough."

"Okay then, tell me what could happen."

Two shivers, one after the other, went down James' spine when Olivia held his hands.

"I am also telepathic."

/ / /

"Where were you?" everyone else asked when they returned to the carousel.

"Creepy fortune-teller lady," James replied.

“Are you dead?” Rita walked up to Caleb and grabbed his shoulders.

“I’m not dead.”

“Maybe,” Jackalope said, “you’re dead and don’t know it.”
Chaz giggled.

Brian said nothing; he looked to the partially cloudy sky. His thoughts were overgrown with confusion and shame (mostly confusion.) He never thought he’d wish for his OCD to distract him from anything.

Caleb pointed at him, “what’s wrong with Brian?”

“He just came back,” Chaz replied, “we all asked, so don’t even bother trying.” He tried to stretch his arm without causing pain.

“He looks sad to me.” *No, really? Here’s a cookie.*

“Rita said she’ll do some research,” Jackalope added.

“On what!? And why!?”

“Um...” Rita paused. “I forgot.”

Caleb sat beside Brian and hugged him, “whatever happened, you don’t have to worry about it, okay?”
He didn’t respond.

“What *did* happen?”
He still didn’t respond.

Caleb let go, “you might feel better if you share?” He smiled.

Brian sighed, “okay. I went to a funhouse with this shadowy girl, and then, I woke up in...nothingness, I guess. Then, this voice said it killed her and had these dark hand things keep me from saving her.”

“But you didn’t kill her?”

“No but...but I... I still feel like it’s my fault, though.”

As far as James knew, Caleb may have prevented Brian from thinking he needed to stay in Carnival and from completing suicide.

Then, Chaz decided that because no one was missing or dead, they should search for Rebecca.

"Why do we have to look *again?*" Rita complained, "we searched every damn place while looking for Brian *yesterday.*"

"We can try the entrance."

"*Phoenix!*" everyone else yelled.

"What the hell!?"

"Seriously, Phoenix?"

"Thanks a lot, you put the idea in his head!"

"Get over it!" Chaz started walking. "I'm finding Rebecca if it's the last fucking thing I do!"

Note how he uses the word "I'm." Rita thought as she tied back her hair.

/ / /

Waiting at the entrance was a woman with long auburn hair and light skin. She was wearing her red dress, a pair of torn black tights, and a pair of red classic Mary Jane shoes.

Rebecca waited for someone to enter Carnival and find her.

8: SEVEN PLUS ONE

Chaz was the first one at the entrance and the first one to see her.

"Rebecca?"

She lifted her head, and her eyes widened, "Chaz!"

"You're alive!" Chaz ran to her, hugged her, and kissed her. Then, he thought, *we are at the entrance.*

He tried opening the gates, "what the fuck!?" *They were open when we got here!*

"What's wrong?" Rebecca asked.

"The stupid fucking gates are locked!" Chaz replied as he kicked them. He growled and continued kicking the gates.

"And kicking will open them?"

Chaz turned to face Brian, "don't tell me what to do!"

"Chaz!" she snapped.

"Short temper," James said to himself.

"How about you shut your fucking mouth?"

"CHAZ!" she repeated.

He stopped and took a deep breath. He glared daggers at James. His face burned.

"Before they start throwing punches," Caleb said, "Rebecca, how'd you survive?"

"The first day here, some fairies led me to some food and water."

"Told ya they were fairies." Rita gave José a smug look.

"They could have been angels in disguise."

"I thought I was the only one here, so I waited at the entrance. Of course, that was after this huge cat tried to kill me. It started to chase me before I got to my car."

"So, that wasn't your car," James said. He regretted messing with Chaz.

Rita sat on the ground; her mind wandered while everyone else told Rebecca what happened to them.

"Rita," something sang.

Huh?

"Rita."

She looked behind her, "is someone here?"

"Yes."

It must be real. My voices don't have a presence. "Where are you?"

"An unnecessary thing to know."

"Guess you're not real then," she told the ghost, turning her head to face the group.

"Do you truly wish to know?"

"Duh!"

"You seem smart. Here's a riddle: you have killed me, but you're alive. Why do I sleep? To be awake. I am to know your most precious possession."

"Hey, Phoenix." Rebecca tapped James' shoulder. "What's wrong with Rita?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

She grabbed everyone else's attention, and they crowded around poor Rita. She didn't respond; her eyes looked empty.

"Rita?" asked Chaz, "are you okay?" (He looked worried.)

Jackalope waved a paw in front of her face, "I think she's dead."

"What makes you think she's dead!?"

She folded her ears behind her head and took a step back.

"Let me try." Caleb sat on his knees. "Will you tell us what's wrong? Um, please?"

Rita responded by finding a stick and writing words into the dirt.

"Some help you were."

"Maybe she'll tell us in a second, *Jackalope.*"

Rebecca and James agreed.

"Talk to us, not draw in the dirt."

She sighed as if to tell what was bothering her, but her response was something Caleb didn't expect:

"I have been *killed,* yet I am *alive.* Do you know why I sleep? To be awake, my dearest. I now *know* that I'm..." she grinned.

"What?"

"*That I am your most precious possession!*"

"Oh, shit! Oh, shit! Oh, shit!" He scrambled to his feet. "IS RITA POSSESSED!?"

"Do you have to shout!?"

"I'm freaking out, okay!?"

Rebecca said nothing. Any word in her mind was erased. She backed away from the woman. Everyone freaked out.

Except for Brian. He knew Rita was possessed by a ghost, but that *voice.* Where had he heard it before?

"Brian," the ghost said.

Uncomfortable shivers kept running down his spine.

"Remember me?"

"You're that kid." *What's happening? What's happening? WHAT'S HAPPENING!?*

"I'm not the shadow you met at the carousel. I have something to tell you."

Brian felt isolated from life, death, and the universe.

I'm alone.

The ghost stood. She revealed an emerald pendant attached to a choker from one of Rita's pockets.

How long has she had that?

"Who could have known that I'd part with this piece of jewelry so soon? Now, I pass my family heirloom to you, Jade."

First, I'm Brian. Now, I'm Jade! Who's Jade? A bug? (No!)

Possessed Rita placed the choker around Brian's neck and said, "I hope you find a way out."

"Out," Brian muttered, "out. Out, out, out, out, out, out, out, out, out, out, out—"

"BRIAN!" Jackalope yanked at his arm.

"Ah! AH, AAH!"

Rebecca growled and grabbed him by the shoulders, "clearly, you forgot the part where you lost your fucking *sanity* in this damn place!"

"I-I was falling, and Rita—I mean, the shadow—"

"What shadow?" Caleb asked.

Coughing. All eyes were now on Rita, who was on her knees hacking up half a lung. She cleared her throat, "I'm okay. I'm okay."

"You are?" José and James crossed their arms.

"I can't believe you did that!" Chaz said.

"Technically I didn't do anything that happened. At least the ghost left."

"When did I ever leave?" the ghost whispered.

"Anyway, what happened?" José asked Brian.

"The ghost gave me this emerald choker thing and said something about finding a way out."

"Did it give you the one on your neck?" Rebecca pointed to the choker.

Brian noticed it around his neck, "I forgot about that."

"Also," she continued, "why did you keep saying 'out?'"

"I don't know." *There aren't bugs on me, right? (Not now!)*

"Maybe Rita said something else while we freaked out," Caleb said.

"Don't look at me," Rita said, "I was too busy trying to solve that riddle."

"A riddle?" Chaz asked.

"Yeah, it went like...uh...forget it. We have to get back to the carousel before we're trapped in the dark."

Everyone else nodded and called it a night.

/ / /

Chaz was beginning to fall asleep when he heard whispering.

"**MY NAME IS SCYTHE. IT WAS I WHO TRIED TO KILL YOU. TOMORROW, YOU WON'T BE WITH YOUR GIRL.**"

"Whatever," he muttered to his paranoia.

9: FLASHBACK

If Chaz were facing the front of the chariot, he would have seen Scythe gently carry Rebecca, but because he wasn't, he shrugged it off and tried to sleep.

///

Rebecca found herself in a ballroom. Its wooden floor was bordered by velvet rope, and sunlight filled the room. It had dark green streamers and paper lanterns with images of trees on them. A row of chairs bordered the other side of the velvet rope.

This is beautiful. She walked El Patio's perimeter. She had only seen a picture of it in an online photo archive. This ballroom became a food court?

BAM! A tree flew through the ballroom and hit Rebecca, causing her to wake up. The sky was still dark.

It was just a dream. Aw, that means I didn't actually see the ballroom. Wait. She felt what may have been asphalt. *This isn't the merry-go-round! Where am I?* Rebecca stood.

Will-o-wisps appeared. Her mother said not to follow them, but because she was already lost, she took a chance.

The first one led Rebecca to one side of the area lined with trees. Its light revealed white stands behind them. Actually, she was surrounded by stands hiding behind trees.

"Speedway," the will-o-wisp whispered.

Lakeside had a race car track?

The second will-o-wisp led her to a damaged yellow car, "the car crashed and made a tree fly. It killed a woman."

Rebecca began to shake. She blinked and found herself at a different crash site. A black car was upside down; its front window had shattered. The asphalt looked wet, and the air suddenly smelled of rain. It scared her more. She closed her eyes, turned around, and opened them. Still at the crash site.

I'm not actually there. I'm not actually there. I'm scared! Rebecca closed her eyes, lay on the asphalt, and opened them. Now, she was inside the car, sitting upside down in the passenger seat. Not a scratch on her body.

Rebecca closed her eyes then opened them. She returned from her flashback; she felt dirt instead of asphalt.

"Baseball diamond," a will-o-wisp whispered.

She cried.

10: EIGHT MINUS ONE

José woke up early, put on his glasses, and saw the black bracelet he wore was replaced by a tiny note.

We hid it in a booth. ~ Fairies

Knowing there were many booths in Carnival, he quickly ate the foot the fairies left before searching.

"My grandma gave me that!" he muttered.

Fifteen minutes later, José found the booth and looked for the rusty key hanging next to the ticket booth. It was missing!

"Looking for this?"

Excuse me, it was *stolen!*

A plump lady with curly brown hair, blue eyes, and a round face. She wore a pink tutu attached to a bodice, white stockings held up by a garter belt, and pink ballet shoes.

"Yes, now give it back! That bracelet is really special to me."

The lady walked up a set of milk crates and onto a wooden stage behind a huge tank of piranhas. She dangled the key over the tank.

Don't drop it in, don't drop it in, don't drop it in!

"I need you to do something for me first."

José rolled his eyes, "this can't be happening. What do you want?"

"There's this wolf—"

"There are no wolves in Colorado."

"Whatever." She waved off his comment. "It's been bothering my poor babies—eh, the piranhas—and I have no hunting skills!"

"Hunt? I can't hunt! I just want my bracelet back."

The lady pulled out a slice of ham from her bodice and dropped it into the tank. Her piranhas fought for it. "My poor babies are nearly starving! How about I throw you in?"

"Sure, throw me—WHAT!?"

"Don't worry, they'll eat you up in seconds."

"You know what?" José pointed to the ticket booth. "I'll just pick the lock."

"Watch, I'll show you!" The lady stepped into the tank, letting her aggressive and hungry sh bite at her flesh.

Have you ever seen something so disturbing that you couldn't stop watching? This was one of those times.

The lady came out with a slimmer body. She walked up to José and put the key in his hand, "you can get your stupid bracelet."

He kept staring at the tank.

/ / /

José returned to the carousel and was met with:

"She might be looking for something."

"No, she's gone. She's gone. She's gone."

Sitting on a jumping greyhound was Chaz worrying.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Rebecca's missing, Rebecca's missing, Rebecca's missing!"

"And we're trying to keep Chaz from having a heart attack," Brian said.

"We just found her; how could she be missing?"

James gasped then smirked as he thought it was a great time to have fun with the information, "I could have prevented this."

"*What!?*" Chaz jumped off the greyhound.

"Uh-oh," Jackalope muttered.

And that's when James knew he fucked up, "the fortune-teller said that-that this could happen. Um, when we would find Rebecca, she might be dead—um, don't-don't quote me on that. Um, but I think I know how to—"

Chaz went for his neck, but Brian held him back.

"YOU KNOW WHAT I'M GONNA FUCKING DO TO YOU, PHOENIX!? YOU KNOW WHAT I'M GONNA FUCKING DO, YOU FUCKING SON OF A BITCH!?"

"No one is killing anyone," Brian said, "no matter how much he deserves it."

"Um, would you forgive me if I helped you find her alive?"

"Alive and unharmed or your death will be slow, agonizing, and merciless. DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME!?"

"Yes," James squeaked. He decided not to mess with Chaz any further.

"Let me go. We're finding Rebecca."

"I'm coming!" José raised his hand.

"Me too," said Jackalope and Caleb.

"We'll stay here-" Rita pointed at herself and Brian-"just in case she comes back."

"Wait for me!" James caught up with the search party. "My life is on the line!"

11: POOR BRIAN

Once the search party was out of sight, Rita tapped Brian's shoulder. He turned around, "yeah?"

"I remember this place." She clasped her hands.

Not this again!

"Before the gates were locked, we would sneak into the park. Once they were, we would play here for hours pretending these animals came to life."

"Wait, what?"

"How do you not remember, Jade?"

Brian tilted his head back and groaned, "I am not Jade; I am Brian! Brian Denton! Are we clear?"

"Yes, you are." The ghost (named Amy) patted his head. "You told me you were going to meet me again by using someone's body. When we met again, you said the only way you'd return here without the pendant was to possess someone and come back here. To White City."

Brian was *completely* lost. There is a ghost possessing Rita who thinks *he* is possessed by a person named Jade? It made no sense.

A cold feeling crawled up his spine.

"May I control you for a second?" a masculine voice asked.

"No! Who's there?"

"Jade."

///

Fortunately for James, the search party found Rebecca alive and unharmed. Chaz led her out of the baseball diamond. She kept her eyes closed the entire time, fearing she would see the crash site again. Meanwhile, Caleb kept himself from becoming Scythe's prey by distracting it with a baseball.

///

After minutes of dead silence, Brian asked, "why do you want to possess me?"

"You have no choice in this, Brian," Jade replied. He placed his hands on his hands on his shoulders, the cold feeling growing stronger.

"You can touch me; that doesn't prove anything."

"I can make you drop dead."

"What." Brian's eyes widened.

"Don't underestimate the power of the dead," Amy said. Rita fainted, and she stood beside her.

He started backing away until a different cold feeling appeared.

"WE'RE EVERYWHERE!" the Laffing Sal sang.

He ran, only to be stopped by Demise.

"Give up, Brian. You have nowhere to run."

"No, no, no!" he muttered.

"What do we do with you?" Demise, Laffing Sal, Jade, and Amy said. They continued chanting.

Brain saw the emerald pendant and remembered the choker around his neck. He attempted to rip it off. His hand shook too much, so Brian curled into a ball and covered his head.

"Please, *please!* Stop saying that! *Please!*"
The group refused to listen.

"Please." His voice cracked. "Please."

"Hey, it's you again!"

Adam? Brian lowered his arms then stood. Not in Carnival.

"Were you—"

"For the last time, I don't hallucinate during seizures!"

Adam turned his attention to the carousel. He sighed, "to think this ride has a sad story surrounding it."

"Story?" Brian asked.

"Weird, huh?"

"There's a story!?"

"More like an urban legend. It's next to the switchboard. Follow me."

/ / /

Rita woke up and was surrounded by José, Chaz, Rebecca, Caleb, Jackalope, and James.

"What are you looking at?" she asked.

"We thought you were dead," José replied.

"Have you seen Brian!?" (Chaz looked worried.)

"No." Rita sat up. "Last thing I remember was the ghost controlling me."

"Oh god, oh god, oh god, oh god, oh god!"

"Calm down," Jackalope said, "he might be taking a walk or something."

12: LEAVING CARNIVAL

Brian found himself back in Carnival with seven worried people waiting for an explanation.

"Where the fuck were you!?" Chaz said.

"Um, I was gonna be killed by some ghosts when I ended up out of here...anyway, here's an urban legend about the carousel."

"You found a way out!?" Jackalope's ears went up.

"Well, no. I-I was there."

Rebecca ripped the paper out of Brian's hand, "maybe it will tell us how to escape this place." She read aloud the story:

At this merry-go-round is the shade of Amy. She waits for a friend named Jade.

Amy and Jade had been friends since childhood. Each night, they would sneak into Lakeside and play next to the merry-go-round.

Inseparable they were! If one were gone, the other wouldn't be content until the absent one returned.

When Amy reached adulthood, her mother gave her a choker with an emerald pendant. She showed it to Jade.

"It's an heirloom," she said.

"It's a beautiful thing to give to a daughter one day."

"Well, I want to give it to you. You're like family to me, no matter what my parents say." Amy placed the choker around Jade's neck. "I hope you find a way out."

"With this, I can always find one."

One week later, Jade was sent to Camp Amache. Then, he was shot during an argument for refusing to let one of the guards "return" the choker he "stole."

Amy cried when she learned what happened. (The guard, however, didn't understand why.) Then, she died from grief.

To this day, she waits at the merry-go-round for Jade, and he waits for Amy at the entrance.

"My hero," Rebecca said flatly.

Brian crossed his arms, "how was I supposed to know!? I didn't read it yet! It's your fault we're stuck here."

"*My* fault!?"

"At the end of the day!"

"You guys can argue about it later." José stepped in between them then was blinded by the emerald when the sun hit it. "Ow."

"That's it!" Chaz cried.

"What's it?" Jackalope said.

"That-that-that what's it called?" He pointed at Brian's neck.

"The choker?"

"Yes, that thing! When Amy gave Jade the choker, she said she hoped he'd find a way out."

"So, it wasn't figurative?" Caleb asked.

"Maybe it was both," replied Rita.

"That's great," James said, "but how will *that* thing get us out of here?"

"I'll tell you."

Everyone jumped.

In front of the group was Jade. He had short dark brown hair, brown eyes, and olive brown skin. He wore a white button-up shirt, a pair of brown slacks, and a brown belt around it.

"Go to the gates, I'll tell you there."

/ / /

Once at the entrance, Jade did as promised.

"When I became stuck at the gates, I noticed a hole that fits the pendant on the choker." He pointed to it. Then, he pulled Brian until his nose touched the gate. "All you need to do is put the pendant through it."

"And how will I get out?" Brian said.

"Don't worry, you will."

He took a deep breath and put the emerald pendant through the lock. *Click.* Brian felt the back of the choker unfasten. He opened the gate and saw Lakeside's parking lot. A warm breeze carried the scent of pollen. The sun was setting.

Chaz, Brian, Caleb, Jackalope, Rebecca, Rita, José, and James walked through the gates. They left Carnival and entered Denver, happy to be free.

"Party at my place!" said Rita.

"I'll drive!" said Caleb.

"I'll drive the other two!" said Rebecca.

"I'll buy the drinks!" said James.

"I'll buy the snacks!" said José.

"I'll bring the tablet for *Bejeweled!*" said Jackalope.

Chaz kissed Brian's cheek, "let's go home, babe."

THE END

13: CLOSURE

Brian: Surprise! Welcome to the stinger. I hope you enjoy it.

/ / /

"The park's closed," Adam said.

"I know, I know," Brian replied, "but I want to see Lakeside when it's still. You know, when nothing's going on."

"I can't let you in with me."

"*Please?*" He smiled.

Adam rolled his eyes, "fine. I'll take you tomorrow. You need to be ready by four, and if I get fired, it's your fault."

"Yay!"

/ / /

Brian stood at the entrance. In front of him was a carousel in plain sight. Left of it was a picnic area with red park benches. To its right was a food court and a bridge leading to KiddieLand. Back on the left was the sign for Cyclone. In front of it was the skeleton of Staride hiding behind some blue spruce trees. Staride looked over a chained-off boating dock with a fence around it.

After twelve years, Brian finally reached the top of his exposure hierarchy! His therapist would have called it cheating because there aren't many bugs in October, but he didn't care.

"Did you know the police got the wrong car?" Adam asked.

"Yeah, they told us. They assumed we found Rebecca because we didn't report her missing."

"I'm gonna check on the carousel. Don't do anything stupid."

Brian turned to face the dock. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath...then coughed because of the cold air. He opened his eyes. The boating dock lacked its chain and fence.

Aw, fuck.

"My baby!" a feminine voice wailed.

Brian jumped.

"Who killed Adriana!? Who killed my baby, Adriana!?"

At least he wasn't the only one mourning.

Maybe I can comfort her, he thought.

The cries seemed loudest at the boating dock, so Brian went there and sat down. The wailing stopped. He stood again.

"I know who killed Adriana," he said (just in case), "it was a woman. I couldn't stop her, though. Something held me back. I barely remember what happened. It's been bothering me lately."

"Turn around," a familiar voice said.

Jade? Brian turned around and gasped. In front of him was the body of Adriana.

"Amy found her in the funhouse. There's been wailing at this lake since you left. We think that if you put her in, it'll stop."

"And what if the woman pulls me in?"

"That's what we're trying to prevent."

Brian nodded. He picked up Adriana's body then turned to face the lake. He sat on his knees, put her in, and watched her sink. He used the sleeve on his coat to wipe away tears.

I'm sorry I couldn't do anything.

"How the hell did you get on there!?"

Brian jumped. He stood and turned around. The chain and fence had returned.

"You want La Llorona to pull you in or something!?" Adam shouted, "get off the fucking deck!"

He did.

"The deck is old. It could break, and you could fall in the water. What if you fell in and had a seizure? What if you fell in and went into shock? There's a fence and chain around it for a reason! Stay off the fucking deck!"

"There wasn't one when I was on it," Brian said.

"Let me guess-" Adam crossed his arms-"you were in the dimension thing."

"Yeah. Um, I should leave now. I'll...I'll just go to the parking lot and call Chaz, so he can pick me up. Bye."

"Goodbye."

Brian walked away, *I have some closure. Now, I don't feel so bad.*

About the Authors

Reanna Field is the legal name of Mint Phalanx, a group of people sharing a brain since 2019. Everyone is parogenic and proud of it.

You can find the phalanx as Tortive on DeviantArt and as mint_phalanx on Dreamwidth.